J. A. McDonald

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THE LATE RIGHT HON. SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD.

By J. A. CHISHOLM, LL.B.

AT Ottawa, on the sixth day of June, 1891, Sir John Macdonald, the greatest Canadian of the age, closed his remarkable career. On the evening of May 29th the members of the Dominion House of Commons were engaged in a fierce debate, when it became the painful duty of Sir Hector Langevin to announce to the House that the Premier had been stricken by paralysis, and that his medical attendant expected his death hourly. The voice of party strife was at once hushed, and the House adjourned for some days. But the heroic man fought death bravely, and the struggle continued for more than a week. Each day brought the news to his sorrowing countrymen that the Premier, although still alive, was getting weaker. Finally, on the evening of the 6th of June, the most distinguished of Canadian and one of the most distinguished of contemporary statesmen passed quietly away.

To write the history of Sir John Macdonald is to write the history of Canada for the long period of his service as a public man; and the history of Canada for the last forty-seven years has been too eventful to be disposed of in a magazine article. Nothing, therefore, is attempted in this sketch beyond giving the barest outlines of a life which has been phenomenal in its rapid and continual success.

John Alexander Macdonald, the son of Hugh Macdonald and Helen Shaw, was born in Glasgow on the 11th day of January, 1815. The family emigrated in 1820, and settled at Kingston, Ontario, at that time the chief centre of the Scottish population of Upper Canada. The future Premier was placed in the Royal Grammar School under the tuition of Dr. Wilson, an Oxford man; and he soon gave token of the splendid talents which later in life displayed themselves in his country's service. He had an excellent memory, and a special aptitude for mathematics; and it is said that when the head-master was showing off his pupils to visitors, he always called upon young Macdonald. In his sixteenth year the young man entered the law office of George Mackenzie, a leading barrister, and he was called to the bar of Upper Canada in 1836. He soon became prominent in his profession. Two years after his admission Von Schultz, a Polish adventurer, who led a band of raiders from the United States into Canada, was captured and put on his trial. Mr. Macdonald defended him with great ability, though unsuccessfully, and a Montreal paper describing the event said the young lawyer would soon be one of the first men in Canada.

Five years later, in 1844, he turned his steps to the sphere in which he was afterwards to shine so brilliantly. A general election was pending, and he contested Kingston in the Conservative interest. He was returned, and during the next few years he showed such wisdom and moderation in his treatment of public questions that in 1847 he was asked to take the portfolio of Receiver-General in the Sherwood-Daly administration. He accepted, and soon exchanged his post for the Crown Lands. His party, however, was growing weak; and

when the House was dissolved and a general election held in 1848, the Conservative ministry was defeated. The Cabinet resigned, and Mr. Macdonald went into opposition under the leadership of Sir Allan McNab.

The sessions of '52 and '53 were held at Quebec. The Hincks ministry, although Liberal, was opposed by George Brown and the extremists associated with him, as well as by the Conservatives under McNab. The result was the defeat of the Government in 1854. The Conservatives were not prepared to form a government, and a coalition ministry was therefore formed, with Mr. Macdonald as attorney-general for Upper Canada. The coalition was distasteful to the extreme Liberals and the ultra-Tories, but it had the support of the moderate men of both parties, as parties previously existed. It was thus the Liberal-Conservative party was formed. During his tenure of office the young attorney-general grappled with and settled the questions of the Clergy Reserves and Seignorial Tenure. Sir Allan McNab retired from the leadership in 1856, and Mr. Macdonald became leader in the House of Assembly, Sir E. P. Tache becoming Premier and leader in the Council. The ministry was defeated in the first session after the reconstruction on the question of the selection of Ottawa as the seat of government. George Brown was called upon to form a cabinet, but failed; and the Governor refused a dissolution. Mr. Macdonald was then again called to office, and Mr. Cartier became Premier.

The session of 1861 opened at Quebec. George Brown advocated the right of Ontario to increased representation. His fierce attacks on the French people did much to create a feeling of hostility between the two provinces of Canada; while Mr. Macdonald on the other hand employed his singular tact to allay this feeling. His ambition was to make Canada a happy and united country under British connection; and the following extract from a speech which he delivered at the time epitomizes the sentiment that actuated him throughout his whole career: —

"I hope that for ages, forever, Canada may remain united with the mother country; we are fast ceasing to be a dependency, and assuming the position of an ally of Great Britain. England will be the centre, surrounded and sustained by an alliance, not merely with Canada, but Australia and all her other possessions. There will thus be formed a vast confederation of freemen, the greatest confederacy of civilized and intelligent men that ever had an existence on the face of the globe."

In 1862 the Government was defeated on the Militia Bill; and for two years its members remained in opposition, after which they were restored to power. About this time the Charlottetown convention took place, and was followed by the Quebec conference, where the question of the union of the Upper and Lower Provinces was considered. In 1865 a coalition was formed between Macdonald and Brown to bring about the union, and resolutions accordingly submitted to the House. Mr. Macdonald's speech on the union was an able and comprehensive presentation of the case, and the measure was carried through the legislature.

The Dominion of Canada, comprising the Provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, was established on the 1st of July, 1867. Mr. Macdonald, who did more than any other man to consummate the scheme of union, was made Knight Commander of the Bath for his eminent services by the Queen. He was also selected as first Premier of the new Dominion, and accepted the portfolio of Minister of Justice. His greatest work, however, was not completed. The four large provinces were united, but a large amount of legislation was now necessary in the way of organizing the various public services, and Sir John Macdonald proved equal to the demand. In the course of a few years the Northwest Territory was purchased from the Hudson Bay Company, and the Provinces of British Columbia and Prince Edward Island joined the union.

Sir John Macdonald was appointed, in 1871, one of the British Joint High Commissioners to act for the settlement of certain disputes between the United States and Great Britain. The result of the conference was the treaty of Washington. The debate on the treaty in the House of Commons was vehement, and the treaty was violently criticised; but finally, after Sir John Macdonald had delivered what remains perhaps as his greatest speech, the treaty was adopted by a majority of 66. Soon after this the Government entered into negotiations for building a trans-continental railway; but it was defeated in 1873, and gave way to a Liberal administration. Sir John Macdonald was anxious to retire from the party leadership; but his party insisted upon retaining him, and he accordingly consented to act as leader of the opposition. With his keen apprehension of what the country wanted, he inaugurated the National Policy, a policy of protection to native industries; and when the general elections of 1878 took place, he fairly swept the country. He again became Premier of Canada. A protective tariff was at once adopted with satisfactory results, and the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway begun. In 1882 the Government appealed to the country, and came back with a large majority, and five years later another general election took place with a similar result.

A few years ago the Liberals adopted a policy of unrestricted reciprocity with the United States. Sir John Macdonald opposed the policy which appeared to him to be anti-Canadian and anti-British, and he gave the people of Canada an opportunity of pronouncing upon it by dissolving the House early in the present year. In his eloquent address to the Canadian people in which he outlined the issue, he used the following language, which considered in the light of subsequent events seems prophetic:

"As for myself, my course is clear. A British subject I was born, a British subject I will die. With my utmost effort, with my latest breath, will I oppose the 'veiled treason' which attempts by sordid means and mercenary proffers to lure our people from their allegiance. During my long public service of nearly half a century, I have been true to my country and its best interests, and I appeal with equal confidence to the men who have trusted me in the past and to the young hope of the country, with whom rest its destinies for the future, to give me their united and strenuous aid in this my last effort for the unity of the Empire and the preservation of our commercial and political freedom."

The result of the election was a majority of nearly thirty for the Government.

In 1872 he was nominated a member of Her Majesty's Most Honorable Privy Council, — a distinction enjoyed by no other colonial statesman, — and in 1884 he was created a G.C.B.

Such, in brief, are some of the more notable political events of this great man's fruitful life. His name is associated with every great public measure enacted in Canada for over forty years. Besides his numerous political distinctions, he received various degrees from the universities, among others the degree of D.C.L. from Cambridge in 1865. He married in early life Miss Clark, who died in 1856, by whom he had one son Hugh J. Macdonald, M. P. for Winnipeg. In 1867 he married Miss Bernard, the present Lady Macdonald, a woman of rare intellectual and social gifts.[1]

It has been said that it is too soon to pronounce judgment upon the life and work of Sir John Macdonald. It is not too soon to proclaim his greatness and popularity, for abundant evidence of these is at hand. The emigrant boy who left Glasgow at the age of five years died the other day the Premier of a united Canada, and the greatest, most powerful, and most popular colonial subject of the British Queen. We may be curious to know the secret of his wonderful success as a statesman, and perhaps it is too soon to determine that matter. In Canada there

[1] Since the above article was written, Lady Macdonald was raised to the peerage by Her Majesty the Queen, with the title Baroness Macdonald of Earnscliffe.

have been greater orators than Sir John Macdonald, greater masters of the details of public measures; but to no other has the prophet's clearness of vision been vouchsafed in the same degree. His opponents admit his patriotic devotion to his country. He was essentially Canadian. His ambition was to create a powerful and prosperous self-governing British colony on the northern half of the continent, and that ambition was amply gratified. The historian of the future, removed from the events of Sir John Macdonald's life, may be able to see more clearly the reasons why his career has been so successful, so fruitful in great things accomplished; we who have been witnesses of that success feel safe in affirming that one reason was that he loved his country and served it well.